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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CONAKRY 000122

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2017

TAGS: PGOV PHUM GV

SUBJECT: GUINEAN FOREIGN MINISTER UNDERESTIMATES  
INTERNATIONAL CONCERN ABOUT HUMAN-RIGHTS VIOLATIONS DURING  
RECENT GENERAL STRIKE

REF: CONAKRY 120

Classified By: Ambassador Jackson McDonald. Reasons. 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) On February 1, Foreign Minister Mamady Conde and the Ambassador met over lunch at the latter's residence. The discussion focused mainly on Guinean domestic politics in the wake of the recent general strike. Young compared to most members of President Lansana Conte's government and entourage, Foreign Minister Conde nonetheless strikes us as an old-thinker, despite his relative openness to the outside world and concern about Guinea's image abroad.

¶2. (C) Foreign Minister Conde, whose name has been mentioned over recent months as a prime-ministerial candidate, confirmed that it had been difficult to get President Conte to sign yesterday's decree (reftel) creating the post of prime minister, with delegated powers as head of government. He said that senior religious leaders had played an instrumental role in extracting the signature. The Foreign Minister agreed that it remains to be seen how much power President Conte will actually delegate to his future prime minister. He said Conte is set in his ways, runs Guinea like a traditional village chief, and will insist on continued access to government funds, which he considers to be his own.

¶3. (C) Foreign Minister Conde said that President Conte remains loyal to the military and vice versa. The Foreign Minister asserted that President Conte would never accept a civilian successor. If he ever retires from office for health reasons, he will call on a general to replace him (i.e., he will not adhere to the constitutional provisions on presidential succession).

¶4. (C) Foreign Minister Conde claimed that the government had mismanaged the recent general strike. At the outset, he said, the government should have rejected the labor unions' political demands since they exceeded the unions' legitimate role, as outlined in the law, as representatives of Guinea's workers. Underestimating the depth and breadth of popular animosity against the Conte government, the Foreign Minister seemed fixated on the unions as the source of the recent trouble.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador stated that the labor unions were only the tip of the iceberg. He said that large segments of the Guinean population had mobilized, for the first time in Guinea's history, to demand better governance, a better standard of living, and hope for the future. He advised that those in power today had better realize this. If not, they risked being swamped by the groundswell of popular discontent that was now reaching tsunami proportions.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked the Foreign Minister how he and the government planned to respond to the killings during the recent general strike, especially on January 22. The Foreign

Minister replied that, as the Minister of Justice told the diplomatic corps on January 29, the Guinean justice system had to be trusted to investigate and prosecute those responsible. He added that the Guinean justice system was capable of dealing with this internal matter; Guinea did not need nor desire an international inquiry.

¶17. (C) The Ambassador responded that the Guinean government's credibility remained low in this regard, because it had yet to prosecute anyone for the killings perpetrated during the previous general strike on June 12. He warned that impunity was a slippery slope: if those responsible are not brought to justice, they will feel free to kill again; if those responsible are not brought to justice, others will think they can get away with similar violence; if those responsible are not brought to justice, the victims' families will take matters in their own hands and seek revenge. The way to prevent this potential cycle of violence, he said, would be for the Ministry of Justice and the entire judicial system to work expeditiously to investigate the killings and to prosecute those responsible.

¶18. (C) The Foreign Minister declared that it remained unclear who was responsible. He then claimed (outrageously) that the labor unions themselves had to bear responsibility for the deaths, because they had called for an illegal protest march on January 22.

¶19. (C) The Ambassador responded that the protest march far surpassed the labor unions, civil society, and the opposition. Of the thousands of participants in the mass demonstration on January 22, most were ordinary Guineans who, for the first time ever, had taken to the streets to demand change. They were unarmed. They did not shoot themselves.

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According to most accounts, Red Berets (presidential guards or another similarly uniformed military contingent) had fired into the crowd.

¶10. (C) The Foreign Minister said that may or may not be the case, but that, in any event, the government did not order anyone to use lethal force to put down the demonstration.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador argued that, in that case, the government had nothing to fear and everything to gain from a prompt, transparent investigation into the killings, leading to the identification and prosecution of the real culprits. The Foreign Minister did not respond; both he and we know full well that it will be extraordinarily difficult to bring members of the Red Berets to justice, even if they acted without orders from above.

MCDONALD